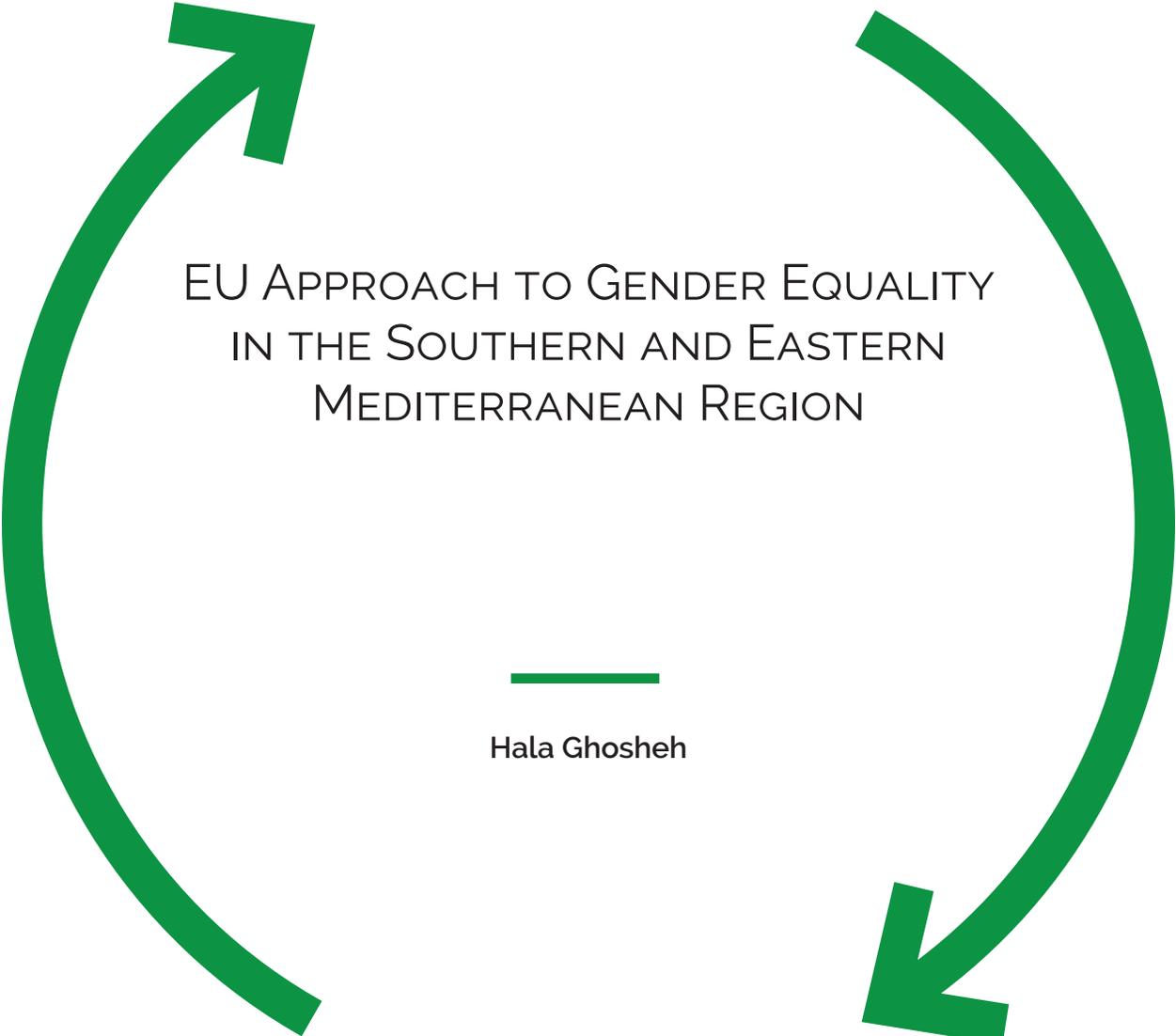




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EU APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY
IN THE SOUTHERN AND EASTERN
MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

The EU legal and political framework reflects a strong commitment to promoting gender equality. Policy dialogue, gender mainstreaming and targeted gender programming are some of the instruments that the EU uses in “partnering countries”. There is a noticeable difference in how the EU approaches gender equality internally (within Europe) as opposed to externally (partnering countries and foreign aid), which not only reflects the economic and political “power over” approach but suggests as well that the EU is setting the gender agenda on behalf of its “partners”. The findings of this paper illustrate that the EU gender equality approach is falling short from adopting a more substantive transformative approach that would lead women to realize their “power within” to claim their rights. Furthermore, EU support to gender equality relies on short-term projects that focus on addressing “trends” determined by the international community and/or the EU priorities for the country, which undermines the substance of the international and EU agendas. On many occasions the findings show that consultations on local priorities are not sufficiently inclusive and rely on the same “favoured organizations” to inform them. The EU’s contribution to promoting gender equality was reported as insufficient, inconsistent and not responsive. MEDRESET papers indicate that gender equality was not systematically or effectively addressed in sectors of agriculture, migration, industry and energy. The mismatch between, on the one hand, the EU focus, and on the other, local priorities and addressing specific gender needs, including socio-economic needs of women, was strikingly evident. The EU role in realizing gender equality and human rights has, especially after the Arab Spring, been somewhat conflicted. EU has prioritized its self-interest and security (hidden influences and powers) over human rights and gender equality in the region. There was general agreement that the EU should “adopt a more critical stance toward human rights violations including women’s rights” (Huber et al. 2018: 21).

INTRODUCTION

There has been significant progress in advancing women’s rights and promoting gender equality in countries of the Mediterranean region in the past years. However, gender equality remains an issue as inequalities continue to persist at social, economic and political levels. The instability within the area, and in some countries after the Arab Spring, has also derailed efforts to promote gender equality and human rights – and in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, has led to loss of rights and freedoms and disruption of effort.

This paper consolidates and synthesizes the common findings and observations made by the MEDRESET research teams on the EU policy and programming approach to gender equality in

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general, and more specifically in reference to agriculture, industry, energy and migration. The observations are made from a gender equality framework that relies on understanding power dynamics within the countries as well as those between the EU and respective countries in relation to substance, instruments and actors.

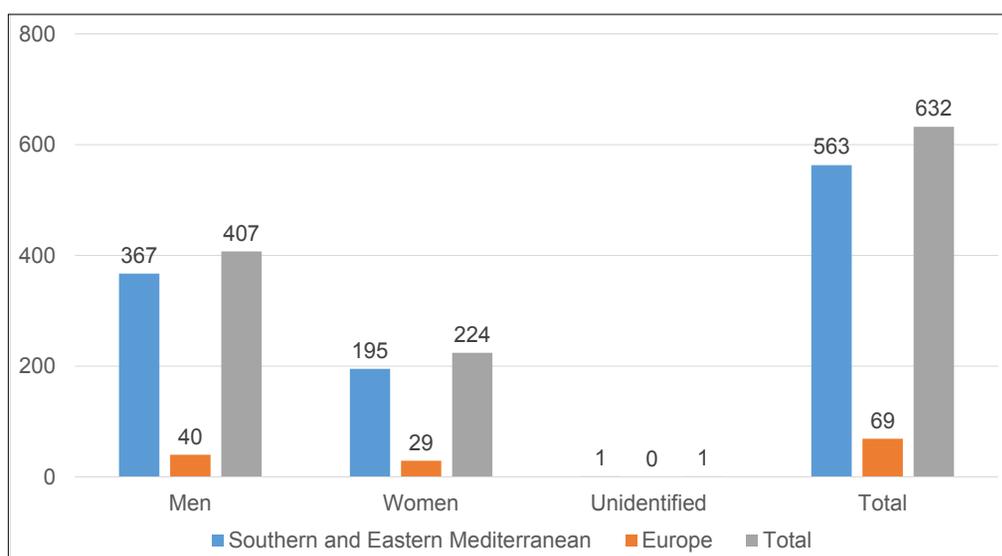
In addition to the introduction, the paper consists of four sections. The first section outlines the methodology used to write the paper. Section two presents the conceptual power analysis framework that unveils the types of power that influence gender hierarchies and dynamics, while at the same time highlighting different forms of power that generate transformative change. It also presents an overview of gender equality in the region. Section three presents the findings with respect to the substance, instruments and actors within EU policy and programmes. The last section summarizes the conclusion and recommendations.

1. METHODOLOGY

Discussions of gender equality have been constant and vibrant throughout the MEDRESET project activities. Guidelines were developed to support the consortium partners to address gender equality through a methodological approach. Despite research team efforts to gather gender-related data, it was evident that the challenges they encountered “tell the story” of fragmented responsiveness towards gender equality within the different sectors and the EU’s policy and programming approach.

Participation of women as informants was not easy to secure. The number of women interviewed across all the research initiatives remained lower than that of men. As Figure 1 shows, women constituted 35 per cent of the total number of respondents (224 women from 632 participants). Women’s participation levels also varied from one country to another and between sectors. As noted by MEDRESET research, the “field work confronted a difficulty with gender balance, because of the omnipresence of men in the structures chosen for our field work” (Mouna 2018: 3).

Figure 1 | Total number of participants interviewed in WP3–WP 7 by sex and region



Diversity in voices of women was limited. Research teams indicated that women were less represented in government and official institutions especially at the senior level. Accordingly, the dominant voice for women in the research represents women from civil society. In interviews conducted about migration and asylum, interviewed women were mostly from civil society as they are less represented in government agencies within this sector (Roman 2018).

Gender equality is not considered a priority. Gender equality concerns and viewpoints were noticeably absent during interviews. In almost all the working papers, it was reported that gender issues were only discussed when introduced by the interviewer, and in most cases were casually addressed. Only a few women and representatives of civil society organizations, in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) countries and in Europe, flagged gender equality and human rights voluntarily.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Patriarchal assumptions continue to underlie economic, political and social models including that of international relations and foreign policy. Feminist critics of international relations theories have argued that the historic absence of women's interest and viewpoints in defining the political direction, within countries, has led to the domination of more masculine assumptions that reflect men's experiences and views. Including women's perspective in shaping international relations and foreign policy is likely to reshape such policy, given that women's experiences and viewpoints are different. Feminist scholars argue that international relations theories "while seemingly gender-neutral, are in fact quite gendered" (Williams 2017) and that they also emerge from the elite group who have access to power and decision-making.

There are multiple definitions of "power" including that which suggests that

Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power. Power is dynamic and relational, rather than absolute. (VeneKlasen and Miller 2006: 38)

Power structures are "sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media [and the law]" (VeneKlasen and Miller 2006: 38) Social groups that are more dominant tend to develop the ideology that further advances the power structure. The ideology, which becomes the "norm" of a society, is set through "a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of perceiving and analysing social reality" (VeneKlasen and Miller 2006: 38). The less dominant groups in society unconsciously conform to the ideology, which may disadvantage them, as a result of its integration into economic and political models as well as social values and principles. Men have been historically the more dominant group, and women have had less access to resources and decision-making to even influence the patriarchal ideology and models.

Feminists argue that the definition of power itself reflects dominance as opposed to empowerment. VeneKlasen and Miller (2006) outlined different forms of power. They also

recognized that the most commonly known form of power is that of *power over*, which implies a negative association of power since one is “taking it from someone else” and imposing one’s will and way on them. Other forms of power tend to consider power as more transformative and enabling. Accordingly, concepts such as *power to*, *power with* and *power within* have emerged as more positive and transformative alternatives to the concept of power over. Allen (2016) also reiterates that the enabling and empowering viewpoint stresses the importance of shifting the definition and concepts of “power” from an overshadowing perspective to one that focuses on the capacity of individuals to be able to transform their conditions by exercising their own will (Allen 2016): *power to*. The concept of *power within* suggests that individuals’ sense of self-worth is well recognized by the person and is reflected in their ability to exercise their agency, accept diversity and generate transformative change. *Power with* represents collective action by persons who share a common goal and will to exercise their desire to change.

Power dynamics are easier to understand when unpacked. There are three types of power: (1) *visible power* is the known public and political authority that makes decisions and defines the rules; (2) *invisible power* comprises the different dimensions that define meanings and formulate assumptions and/or control information among decision-makers (e.g., social norms, culture, religion, etc.); (3) *hidden power* rests with those who define the agenda and priorities for action and discussion (e.g., interest groups, etc.) (VeneKlasen and Miller 2006: 39–41).

Power analysis is at the core of understanding gender hierarchies and the potential impact of policies, programmes and projects on women and men. Visible powers are sometimes blatantly discriminating against women while the invisible and hidden powers are commonly the more significant influencers in impeding or facilitating transformative change towards gender equality.

The question of access and control over resources and decision-making is also at the heart of power analysis. By being able to influence the agenda and direction of policy, programming and financial allocations, individuals help sustain the power dynamics. Consequently, those who have stronger access to resources (monetary, social networks and knowledge) are likely to have their interests and needs met more than those who have less access.

Since social exclusion is not an absolute state but rather a changeable one, power structures, dynamics and influencers can change. The ability to reengage and negotiate the right to participate and challenge the power relations (Batliwala and VeneKlasen 2012) is a question of *agency*. The more individuals and/or groups understand their power and ability to exercise their rights, demand their inclusion and project their voice, the more they can reshape the power structures, gender hierarchy and social relations.

Within this framework, the paper reviews the power structure and dynamics that influence and direct the substance of gender equality policies, including the actors and instruments that the EU has chosen to enhance the realization of gender equality in the EU southern neighbourhood countries (Table 1), taking into consideration that the conceptualization of the EU’s gender equality system reflects the ideology of the economically and politically more powerful actor.

Table 1 | Deconstructing EU gender equality policy using power analysis (questions to be answered)

| | Substance | Instruments | Actors |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Visible power | How does the EU approach gender equality? | What instruments does the EU have to promote gender equality? | Who has the power to access the EU? |
| Invisible power | What influences EU priorities to promote gender equality? | What factors influence the EU choice of instruments and do these factors endorse power relations or challenge them? | What are the factors that influence EU choices of actors? |
| Hidden power | What are the competing interests of the EU that jeopardize its commitment to gender equality? | Whose interest will be served and how are power dynamics addressed through the selected instruments of support/collaboration? | How are power relations balanced to encourage diversity of voice and stronger agency among women? |

GENDER EQUALITY IN SEM COUNTRIES: OVERVIEW

The Southern and Eastern Mediterranean is not a homogeneous region especially on gender equality issues. Women's and men's ability to exercise and realize their rights varies not only because of social structure but also legalities. Cultural contexts also differ, and power dynamics are diverse since the potential and capabilities of women and girls, men and boys are highly influenced by the opportunities that they have and the differing social composition that exists. The diversity of groups within countries and the respective specificities account for the intersectional variables that affect gender hierarchies, generate different disparities and needs. Thus, some of the observations are specific to the local contexts.

Women's representation in parliaments in the SEM region varies among countries but is still markedly lower than is true for men. Women's voices, interests, experiences and perspectives are underrepresented and sometimes are missing from decision-making processes and forums. The total proportion of women holding national parliament seats in the Middle East and North Africa region is estimated at 16 per cent which is lower than the global percentage (23 per cent). Nonetheless, the gap between countries is relatively high: in Algeria and Tunisia more than 30 per cent of seats are held by women, compared to zero representation for women in some Gulf countries. What is worth noting as well is that both Tunisia and Algeria have higher rates of women participating in parliament than the 28 per cent average for OECD countries (World Bank 2017: 6).

Women's capacities and aspirations continue to be undermined legally, economically, socially and culturally as a result of the gender bias assumptions that prevail within the power structure

and political ideology. In 2017, the World Bank reported that the Middle East and North Africa region's "average share of legal differences" is higher than for any other region, and within that region the divergence is noticeably high (World Bank 2017: 6). For example, the Northern African countries of Tunisia and Morocco have more empowering and protecting laws vis-à-vis women than do Lebanon and Egypt.

Gender-based violence and violence against women is widespread as well. The different conflicts in the region have led to an increase in the level of violence and violations of women's rights. Early marriages have increased among refugees and communities, and reports of violence against women (physical as well as sexual) have also increased.

This is not to deny that in past years, the gender gaps have been reduced in the SEM region. More women have been able to redefine their role and attain more access to resources. Women's education and health has improved and their participation in the political and economic spheres has been increasing. However, there are still higher aspirations to reveal women's potential, especially given that "the educational gains achieved by women are yet to translate into concrete results in terms of greater empowerment and equal perspectives" (Sijilmassi 2017: 6).

3. FRAMING GENDER EQUALITY: SUBSTANCE, INSTRUMENTS AND ACTORS

MEDRESET did not specifically collect data to assess the level of women's participation in EU policy and programme design. However, the research teams did try to gauge stakeholder understanding of the EU gender equality approach in relation to different sectoral policies and programmes as well as the overall role. The EU does not adopt a feminist approach to foreign policy, which implies that gender equality is not an overarching goal in itself but rather a core value, which theoretically guides such works but is highly dependent on having an effective and relevant framework to ensure its functionality. By contrast, a feminist framework implies that the EU will commit to fighting social inequalities with respect to rights, representation and resources² through its political and development policies, programmes and overall stance. This more transformative agenda would require the restructuring of strategies, working approaches, mindsets and decision-making processes.

GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK: SUBSTANCE

The approach and content of gender equality frameworks are affected by the economic, political and contextual backgrounds of the people who design them. Hidden and invisible powers of interest groups, social norms and competing priorities also guide the direction of such frameworks. This section attempts to address questions relating to how the EU approaches gender equality. For instance, what influences EU priorities to promote gender equality? What are the competing interests of the EU that jeopardize its commitment to gender equality?

² The three Rs framework (rights, representation and resources) is the Swedish government's approach that has guided the process of adopting a feminist foreign policy. Sweden is the first country to do so.

HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH VS. A NEEDS APPROACH

Gender equality principles and values are enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights. To translate its commitment and guide its internal and external work on gender equality (GE), the EU has developed and adopted the Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality Framework (2016–2019), which outlines the GE commitments at the policy, institutional and funding programme level (European Commission 2016), as well as the 2011–2020 European Pact for Gender Equality (Council of the EU 2011). The EU also adopted the Gender Equality Framework (2016–2020) which guides the EU’s external relations (European Commission and EEAS 2015).

The language used in formulating the priorities/pillars for action within the EU and with external partners suggests that the external EU approach reflects a “needs-based” as opposed to a “rights-based” approach. As shown in Table 2, the priorities of the Strategic Engagement document pertain more to women realizing equality and rights, whereas the pillars of the GE framework are more about actions for women. This latter approach reduces accountability and reaches out to women as beneficiaries as opposed to active change agents. Notably as well, the EU formulation about gender-based violence suggests that the Strategic Engagement document is more gender neutral whereas the Framework adopts a more “paternalistic” setting that aims to protect women as opposed to end/reduce violence against them.

Table 2 | Priorities as noted in the GE Strategic Engagement and GE Framework

| Strategic engagement for gender equality (2016–2019) | Gender equality framework (2016–2020) |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing female labour-market participation and the equal economic independence of women and men. • Reducing the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps and thus fighting poverty among women. • Promoting equality between women and men in decision-making. • Combating gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims. • Promoting gender equality and women’s rights across the world. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fighting violence of any kind against women and girls (protecting women and girls against violence and situation of conflict, harmful practices). • Economic social empowerment (increasing access to opportunities). • Strengthening voice and participation (promoting engagement at all levels). • Shifting institutional culture (identify local priorities). |

The EU approach to SEM women is sometimes stereotypical. For example, in approaching migration issues women are not perceived as potential migrants with particular challenges but are most often approached as victims of trafficking or as women who are “left behind” to care for families. In industry as well, women have been confined to “appropriate fields” such as textiles and are usually engaged in low-paying jobs.

The difference between a needs approach and a human rights approach is not only about the formulation of the approach; instead, it mainly concerns the distribution of power. A needs approach tends to create dependency on those providing the services whereby there is an

element of exercising economic or decision making “power over” those who need the service. Beneficiaries do eventually gain “power to” act and assume opportunities but most commonly their status and ability to control and exercise their rights independently remains limited and most commonly is not sustainable (a temporary sense of power). By contrast, a rights-based approach focuses on supporting the individuals to learn their rights and nurture the power within them to act and voice their interests as well as claim their unrealized rights. Human rights-based programming requires more persistence, effort and time, which in the context of short-term foreign aid is not always feasible and is not always aligned with the donor’s political and economic interests in the country. Indeed, the politicization of human rights and gender equality has undermined local efforts to challenge these issues. For example, the EU, along with other European and international donors, has ignored Egypt’s crackdown on freedoms and women’s human rights defenders, out of concern for its own security. For example, a local stakeholder reported that in Egypt, “gender and sexuality are no longer safe topics [...]. As a result, many NGOs defending women’s human rights have been under attack and have suffered from judicial procedures” (Huber et al. 2018: 18). In Egypt, gender was also framed as a tool to enhance the autocratic regime:

controlling women’s bodies is a way to control the population, leaning on the consent or even the active complicity of males who themselves are victims of oppression. This explains the specific harassment that women defenders have to face. Gender is one of the cornerstones of authoritarianism. (Moonrises and Zenzi 2018: 19).

GENDER EQUALITY WITHIN EU POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Despite the commitment to mainstream a gender perspective into all programmes, the EU policies are sometime gender neutral and or blind. According to European civil society stakeholders, “the EU does not have an overall strategy to mainstream gender sensitivity in its cooperation policies in the field of migration and asylum, and that there is a clear lack of specific gender policies” (Roman 2018: 13). It was also noted, by both European and SEM stakeholders, that

female migration is underrepresented in the dominant discourse of both European and SEM interlocutors. Issues such as the emigration of SEM women alone, female refugees in Lebanon and Turkey, domestic workers in Lebanon, (often trafficked) sub-Saharan migrant women in Tunisia and Morocco, as well as the consequences of male migration on SEM women ‘left behind’, are systematically left out of the picture. (Roman 2018: 13)

Migration is not the only sector to report the weak consideration of gender issues. Other sectors also indicated that the EU policies and programmes were not necessarily responsive to bridging gender gaps and, in some cases, continued to assume gender neutrality and ignore women’s socio-economic needs and rights. In agriculture women’s access to land and resources was neglected in policy and programming. Their needs as farmers were also overlooked. Similarly, in industry and energy women’s issues were marginalized: “women are not considered as relevant stakeholders in the energy transition”, and “even though the issue of gender is relevant to analysis of the industry sector in general due to the feminization of employment in the textile industry, it does not seem to be an issue of concern for the stakeholders, national policies and the EU” (Aboushady et al. 2019: 17, 16).

The EU's role in promoting gender equality and human rights falls short of leveraging change on sensitive issues such as democracy, freedom of expression and realizing rights. As a member of a labour organization said,

You have to tackle not only exploitation or gender, but everything. You cannot fight exploitation without given women's rights, you cannot fight to give the right of the women without fighting sectarianism. The solution is complicated because the system is complicated. (Goulordava 2018: 11)

EU GENDER EQUALITY PRIORITIES

EU priorities for gender equality in the SEM region are perceived by local stakeholders to represent EU priorities as opposed to local ones. One female interviewee noted, "the EU does not take into consideration what people want but what EU leaders think they want". The interviewee continued to explain that

There are policy trends or programme trends that, for example, once was livelihood, and then it is capacity building. This pumps money in a certain direction but it does not take nuance of a situation or possible harm. In some areas things work differently and aren't the most needed everywhere. (Goulordava 2018: 8)

This was also echoed across the papers as interviewees indicated that gender inequalities and social injustices are not adequately addressing the "real problems". One interviewee noted:

they think to keep migrants in this country, and [so that they do] not go to the EU, they need to pump money here. [...] [This policy] is trying to more deeply entrench global inequality. Keep refugees in Lebanon but in liveable yet bad conditions but not in a way that they will leave. Their response has been to raise the standard of living but not tackle the reasons why the standard of living is so low. (Goulordava 2018: 9).

LEVEL OF GENDER RESPONSIVENESS IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMING

MEDRESET papers indicated that gender issues were barely addressed by participants across the different sectors. In energy women's role was "underestimated". Equally so in industry-related policies and programming. It was noted that "when the effectiveness of EU policies with respect to the industrial sector is assessed at the social level, stakeholders in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia claim that issues related to women and youth, who need assistance the most, have not been specifically addressed in the four economies" (Aboushady et al. 2019: 16). There is also indication that "women are still generally excluded from the industrial sector or concentrated in some low-value-added sectors. For instance, in Tunisia, women have minimal presence in the industrial sectors except for textiles, a sector that is somewhat in decline and provides women with very low wages and poor working conditions" (Aboushady et al. 2019: 16). Unfortunately, these missed opportunities fail not only to enhance the power of women and youth in the region, through increasing their access to resources and economic activities, but also to facilitate their recognition and realization of rights.

Similarly, women's priorities and barriers to participate in and benefit from agriculture are largely ignored. EU programming continues to target large-scale farming and ignore restrictions that women farmers face:

The EU-supported project, though ambitious and intent on generating agricultural and economic growth, has not alleviated rural poverty, while largely benefitting large-scale agricultural holdings and has widened the poverty gap that often is the source of divide between different actors and stakeholders in the agricultural sector. With close to no attention paid to food security and a rise in inequalities and poverty, rural populations are disappointed with a project that was vigorously supported by the EU, but did not include their perception and concerns, nor did it assess their needs. (Hamade et al. 2018: 8)

PERCEPTIONS ABOUT EU COMMITMENT TO GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Stakeholders across the papers indicated that EU securitization and politicization of its policies and programmes in the Mediterranean region has influenced its role in promoting the human rights and gender equality agendas. The EU has, in the perspective of some of the respondents, traded off human rights and gender equality for protection of its own interests. The "EU looks like an institution that funds civil society making the rise of development agents possible, and at the same time it looks like an institution seeking to protect its interests" (Mouna 2018: 17).

EU commitment to gender equality and human rights is influenced by multiple factors, which include but are not limited to political and economic interests. As noted by a European NGO, "the social impacts of the [association agreements] are not really a subject of concern despite the EU narrative on inclusive growth, employment and gender issues" (Bianchi et al. 2018: 12). This Eurocentric approach, which is a significant "hidden power" that influences EU policies, has not only depoliticized gender equality but also securitized it. By acting to safeguard Europe from emerging extremism in the South, the EU was seen to compromise its commitment to gender equality and human rights: "the priorities for the EU were supporting the democratic transition, and people's aspiration to freedom and a better life, then those priorities got changed to security, anti-radicalization and preventing illegal migration" (Dark 2018: 10).

The EU's role in promoting human rights and gender equality has changed since the Arab Spring. EU support to the autocratic regimes and current power structures is perceived as a confirmation of its selective commitment to human rights and gender equality in the SEM countries: "Europe does not really care about human rights and just funds human rights organizations. It works with civil society along 'safe lines' (culture, gender, etc.) but when it comes to the real issues, the EU sides with the authorities and the status quo" (Huber et al. 2018: 16-7).

SEM actors also indicated that the EU is willing to "turn a blind eye" on breaches of human rights, social equality and democratic practice in return for increasing its security and limiting the influx of migrants and refugees:

EU policy does not seek to be involved in the growth and development of countries

of the south; it is simply protecting its economic interests and protecting its borders. The interviewees emphasized that the EU should treat countries of the south fairly, particularly on the economic level. (Mouna 2018: 17)

A female interviewee in Morocco said:

Every year, the EU makes a call for proposals for different issues. [...] These projects focus on the issues of migration and illiteracy. This cooperation serves the interest of the EU first and foremost. The EU works on issues such as diversity, freedom of women and religious freedom because they serve its interest. (Mouna 2018: 17)

Some voices from the stakeholders, especially women, indicated that EU support to human rights and gender equality organizations has helped advance the discussions and bridging of gender gaps. An Egyptian journalist indicated that "programmes such as gender and sexuality, mostly funded by the EU and its member states, were really great" (Moonrises and Zenzzi 2018: 18, Huber et al. 2018: 15). Interviewees in Morocco also "expressed their appreciation for the EU's efforts through civil society against the discriminatory laws and violence against women as well as its support for the recognition of homosexuality and the decriminalization of consensual sexual relations" (Dark 2018: 14).

In some cases, interviewees also indicated that despite the flaws in EU programming especially in overlooking gender issues, targeted projects do support women and advance their strive towards realizing their rights. For example, in Lebanon "projects targeting cooperatives have enabled women in rural settings to become more independent, and these projects also tend to have a large impact on society as a whole, such that knowledge transfers tend to trickle down to other members" (Hamade et al. 2018: 10).

4. EFFECTIVENESS OF EU INSTRUMENTS FOR PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

This section focuses on unpacking the visible, hidden and invisible power influencing the EU choice of instruments. Accordingly, it seeks to respond to such questions as: What instruments does the EU have locally to promote gender equality? What factors influence the EU choice of instrument and does this choice endorse power relations or challenge them? Whose interests will be served and how are power dynamics addressed through the selected instruments of support and collaboration?

EU GENDER EQUALITY APPROACHES

To realize the defined priorities, the EU has identified three working approaches to promoting gender equality: (1) gender equality through policy and political dialogue, (2) gender mainstreaming, and (3) directed gender equality programming.

The three approaches are not mutually exclusive and use a variety of instruments for operationalization. SEM participants referred to budget support, trade agreements, bilateral funding and grants.

POLICY AND POLITICAL DIALOGUE

The EU is also not capitalizing on its power to influence and promote gender equality in respective countries. A female interviewee indicated that

when trade negotiations with the EU neighbourhood countries were ongoing, CSOs [civil society organizations] asked the EU to include a focus on social rights, particularly concerning youth and women, in the negotiations – as a sort of positive conditionality. The impact assessment of these agreements nevertheless led to the finding that the EU had not put this issue as one of the priorities of the negotiations. (Huber and Paciello 2018: 10, Huber et al. 2018: 14)

The findings of the working papers, from both SEM and European perspectives, suggest that the EU is underutilizing its economic and political power to promote gender equality and human rights. EU civil society stakeholders point out that “while the EU should maybe not suspend the association agreement (as this would negatively impact on development), it could still take a more critical posture; and that due to its economic power, the EU does have leverage” (Huber et al. 2018: 11). However the EU is being seen “as a much more self-interested, pragmatic actor than in previous years, pursuing ‘business as usual’ to a greater extent than before” (Huber et al. 2018: 12).

GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Findings from the MEDRESET working papers suggest that “gender is, in general, not mainstreamed in EU policies and when it is taken into consideration, it is based on vague initiatives or limited projects that do not significantly promote women’s labour participation in decent jobs in the industrial sector” (Aboushady et al. 2019: 16). Working papers on agriculture and migration reported similar trends. Women and gender inequalities were not addressed, and when they were mentioned (e.g., in terms of migration), the gender issues were not necessarily transformative nor were they addressing the core concerns. In agriculture it was noted that “the EU’s programmes targeting gender equality and integrating a gender perspective in the agriculture sector are inadequate in implementation and evaluation, leading to a failure in conducting needs assessments to issues that challenge the development of gender equality” (Hamade et al. 2018: 10).

DIRECTED GENDER EQUALITY PROGRAMMING

EU has programmes that specifically target women’s advancement and empowerment, but SEM stakeholders, particularly women from civil society, questioned the effectiveness of the programmes, particularly those supporting governments. In Morocco one interviewee noted that

EU policy, particularly in the field of human rights, did yield results but it should be mentioned that many initiatives are implemented through the government, namely through the ministry of family and women’s affairs. These funds do not actually achieve their objective as they are distributed based on political calculations. (Mouna 2018: 15)

It was suggested that the EU be “more reactive towards women’s human rights violations and show more public support towards NGOs dealing with women’s inclusion” (Moonrises and Zenzzi 2018: 19) European civil societies endorsed the need to focus more on women’s rights and even suggested that

EU’s action should not be limited to the implementation of ad hoc female specific projects, which in most cases address the issue of human trafficking only. In the area of migration, the EU is expected to have an overall structural gender policy, addressing different aspects of female migration in a comprehensive way and in a long-term strategic perspective. (Roman 2018: 16)

They also labelled the EU approach as “very superficial” and as a “check-box ticking approach”. One interview suggested that it “is a power discourse that goes to the disadvantage of women” (Huber and Paciello 2018: 10, Huber et al. 2018: 21).

PREDETERMINED SCOPE AND DEFINED POWER

The instruments used by the EU to facilitate access to resources, for both government and civil society to address inequalities, are decisive in defining the scope of local partners’ power. Stipulations and conditions are introduced to agreements with governments, especially with respect to budget support, and as such the EU can leverage action to address gender inequalities, if it decides to do so. Civil society grants and support is usually a response to a request for proposals that is conditional to achieving the already EU-decided scope. Of course, the EU’s financial resources render the civil society organizations – and sometimes governments – less powerful to negotiate terms and arrangements of agreements.

NEEDS ASSESSMENTS, MEETING LOCAL NEEDS AND ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES

EU programming procedures limit its responsiveness to local needs. It was continuously repeated, across all working papers, that the EU is not addressing the locally identified problems and priorities. In agriculture, “several stakeholders stated that they would appreciate a shift in the EU’s assistance towards a focus on local support” (Hamade et al. 2018: 9). Stakeholders also noted that baseline surveys and needs assessments are often overlooked and as such EU funding is sometimes redirected to unneeded services. The EU is perceived to “neglect baseline and needs assessments and evaluations, which leads to its failure in addressing the most pressing challenges” (Hamade et al. 2018: 9).

COMPLICATED BUREAUCRATIC PROCEDURES

EU bureaucracy is a key barrier for civil society organizations to access resources and implement effective programmes. SEM stakeholders indicated that the projects are managed by the EU in a “technocratic way”; interviewees pointed out that the time frame of projects is too short, as a result of which beneficiaries are “unable to plan past a very short time’, while there is also a general perception about a ‘complicated, bureaucratic, lengthy process and procedure to access funds” (Huber et al. 2018: 13). EU stakeholders also noted that the procedures are complicated to an extent that local organizations, except for a few select ones, “have insufficient capacity to manage highly technical EU funding procedures” (Roman 2018: 17).

EU PARTNERING ACTORS

The MEDRESET working papers identified two strategic partners: the governments and the local, European and international civil society organizations. The relationship between the EU and its partners was described as having an imbalance of power. Actors and stakeholders in the context of EU policy setting and programming are reviewed at two levels. The first group of stakeholders and actors are those who shape EU policies and programmes. Actors in this group tend to have stronger access to decision-making and are probably the ones who define the direction and agenda (invisible power). The second group comprises those who work to implement the EU programmes. In some cases, and as SEM stakeholders reported, they may be the same. To better understand the power dynamics in the selection of and interaction with stakeholders, it will be important to clarify who has the power to access theme EU. What are the factors that influence the choice of actors in managing EU programmes? And, how are power relations balanced to encourage diversity of voice and stronger agency among women?

CHARACTERIZING ACTORS

SEM stakeholders across all sectors indicated that the EU needs to improve consultations with local actors, in terms of both diversity and flexibility. Voices of diverse social groups are not always represented and participation is sometimes limited. Some stakeholders claimed that EU consults and works with a favoured “*elite group of NGOs and actors*”, both women and men, which eventually results in supporting the interests and unilateral view of those groups. Subsequently, the EU appears to be supporting and reinforcing ideologies and interests of select groups. Interviewees “perceived EU contributions to be biased to pro-western elites and civil society”; the organizations were also labelled as “inefficient, corrupt and co-opted” (Huber et al. 2018: 13). Other descriptions of EU civil society actors suggested that they are “well established” CSOs that have strong ties with European stakeholders and that often benefit from the EU’s financial support. EU civil society stakeholders indicated that “the genuinely local grassroots organizations [...] are often unable or unwilling to access EU funding [and] are generally neither involved nor consulted by EU institutions” (Roman 2018: 17). Of course civil society organizations that do have access to the EU are very likely to influence its policy and programming direction. This is why European civil society actors highlighted the importance of broadening the consultation process and also indicated that “civil society consultations and involvement in decision-making processes should not be intended as a mere formality” (Roman 2018: 17).

SEM interviews also indicated that EU favouritism towards non-local civil society organizations reduces the effectiveness of EU programming. International and European CSOs do not necessarily always know the local context, dealing with governments and the core problems. Subsequently, they are considered “ineffective change-makers” (Dark 2018: 13).

INCLUSIVENESS

Voices of local communities, particularly women, are less represented in EU policies and programming. An Egyptian stakeholder indicated that “the EU should engage more with the local population in formulating its gender policies for the Mediterranean countries. It was noted that policies formed within European circles without directly contacting the local people

and the civil society are not seen as effective” (Dark 2018: 14). This was endorsed by SEM stakeholders elsewhere, and also among EU stakeholders. Indeed, there was also reference to the need to hire local consultants and experts to undertake research and assignments in order to contextualize the findings instead of using Europeans and/or internationals. Broadening the consultation processes and adopting a “bottom-up” approach will help inform EU policy and programming and will reduce the misalignment between EU work and local needs. It is also worth noting that women, especially in Tunisia, were found to be “more vocal about societal challenges while the narratives of male respondents were more politics-oriented” (Dark 2018: 14). This difference is equally important to highlight since the absence of women’s voice in higher positions, and/or in the consultation process, may lead to overlooking different and diverse perspectives. Indeed, women interviewees in Tunisia, Turkey and Qatar were more keen on making links “between the gender issue and separate policy areas such as the role of the state, economic advancement, civil society, environmental awareness and labour rights” (Dark 2018: 14).

CONCLUSION

Advancing gender equality and promoting women’s realization of their rights requires a coherent approach that challenges power dynamics and gender hierarchies in a transformative manner. The underrepresentation of women in political and economic decision-making processes, discriminatory laws, marginalization/dismissal of rights groups, restrictions on the freedom of speech, and weak inclusive policies are visible powers that contribute to increased marginalization of women and their role in society. The fear of change and patriarchal dominance as well as authoritarian regimes reinforce the status quo even if they are not so blatant (invisible powers). Civil society organizations as well as social media influencers have had hidden power to influence discussion and redirect agendas. Donors also have access to influence policies and priorities at the country level through political dialogue and financial support; however, the extent to which such power is exercised has been relative to donor interests. Through the MEDRESET research, stakeholders noted that the EU was underutilizing its influence to promote human rights and gender quality in the respective countries.

The EU’s visible power rests in its financial support and political relations with the respective countries. The nature and scope of aid provided enables the EU to negotiate and possibly influence the context. This power appears to be underutilized in advancing the discussion on and contributing to the realization of human rights and gender equality in respective countries. It was also evident that the securitized approach and political interests tend to be the invisible power that directs the EU’s political decisions concerning the respective countries. Of course, the economic and political interests of the EU define its priorities and agenda.

Opinions of the EU’s role in promoting gender equality agenda varied: some recognized its role in supporting local actors, particularly women’s organizations, to renegotiate the historic exclusion of women and gain stronger ground for demanding and exercising their rights. Others, on the other hand, questioned the EU’s motives, which on occasion compromise human rights and gender equality agendas for the protection of the EU’s political and economic interests.

The EU's practices in developing policies and programmes and in negotiating agreements with the Mediterranean are constructed within a power framework rather than an empowerment framework. While this may have served the security, political and economic interests of the EU, it has also influenced its ability to advance human rights and gender equality in the targeted countries and has thereby rendered some of its policies and programmes ineffective. Power relations and dynamics – visible, hidden and invisible – all affect the EU's gender equality policy and programming. Indeed, they influence the substance, choice of instruments and choice of actors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the EU's on-the-ground commitment to gender equality and human rights it is suggested that the EU:

- Revisit the underlying assumptions of policy and programme design to reflect a human rights-based approach;
- Develop a stronger gender equality system that is co-led by local knowledge and expertise and promotes transformative change;
- Review and adjust its gender mainstreaming approach to ensure that sectoral policies are gender responsive;
- Assume a more robust role in promoting a gender equality and human rights approach in policy dialogue with respective countries and leverage negotiation power to advance a transformative agenda;
- Enhance commitment to a more inclusive, responsive approach to integration of voices of stakeholders, women/girls and men/boys, in defining projects, needs, interests and intervention;
- Promote equality and inclusiveness within country contexts through leveraging power to support local, diverse groups of women and men in defining their own discourse within emerging democratic systems;
- Align EU gender equality and human rights policy and programme direction with local priorities; and
- Strengthen the monitoring and accountability framework for promoting gender equality.

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